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# Conscripts Come Home, Well-Drilled Sandinistas

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua, Sept. 11 — During his two years in the Sandinista army, Marlon Antonio Flores fought off rebel ambushes, survived bombardment and lived in inhospitable mountains for months at a time.

But as he was officially discharged from the army on a recent Saturday afternoon, Mr. Flores said his "revolutionary work" was far from over.

"The army changed me a lot," he said. "There was political instruction all the time. You come back very aware of your responsibility to the revolution."

Mr. Flores is one of thousands of Nicaraguan soldiers, called up when conscription began in 1984, who are now being released from military service. He said he was coming home much more positive about Sandinista rule than he was when he reluctantly presented himself for his pre-draft physical examination more than two years ago.

## Drilled in Political Attitudes

Sandinista leaders have structured the army to be not only a fighting force, but also a tool for inculcating Sandinista values. During their two years of service, soldiers learn political attitudes that their commanders hope will make them ideal defenders of the revolutionary cause when they return to civilian life.

"These young men will have very important roles," said Carlos Carrion Cruz, a senior Sandinista leader, after he presided over the formal discharge of 300 soldiers at an open field in a poor quarter of Managua.

"They are tested troops who will greatly improve the reserve defense units in our cities," Commander Carrion said. "Also, they come back with a high political consciousness, and they recognize the need to transmit that to others."

The military draft was very controversial when it was introduced at the beginning of 1984. Thousands of youths fled the country to avoid service and many more went into hiding.

Recruiters were involved in violent clashes in some areas.

## Desertion Rates Reported High

Some non-Sandinista politicians have opposed the draft, charging that young people are being conscripted into an army dominated by a single political group, the Sandinistas. But Government leaders, locked in war against United States-backed insurgents, say defense is a task for everyone.

Desertion rates of those conscripted have been high, according to diplomats. Although no official figures have been released, as many as 20 percent or more of the first wave of recruits deserted. The number of desertions is believed to have declined since then, but it remains significant.

But thousands of young men accepted the draft call, some enthusiastically and others because they had no realistic alternative, and they have now served their two years. As the first of them have been demobilized in recent weeks, there is evidence that they may provide a new injection of much-needed revolutionary fervor in a society drained emotionally as well as economically by the continuing war.

At the demobilization ceremony in Managua, several soldiers interviewed at random said they planned to be active in Sandinista labor or youth groups, student unions or other "mass organizations." They said their experience over the last two years had shown

them the importance of defending revolutionary rule in Nicaragua.

Since the demobilizations began in July, several young veterans have assumed positions of responsibility in Sandinista organizations.

Gustavo Tiffer, 22 years old, has become one of the Managua coordinators for the Sandinista defense committees, neighborhood groups that deliver some local services and monitor activities of residents.

David Ruiz Velasco, who like Mr. Tiffer was discharged from the army in July, pointed to his status as a veteran in his successful campaign to win the vice presidency of the secondary students' federation in an election in August.

"We are not leaving the trenches," said one of the men demobilized in Managua, Luis Manuel Hernández, in an address to his comrades. "We have work to do in civil defense and in ideological struggle. Young Sandinistas do not stop fighting."

Diplomats in Managua said the appearance in civilian society of thousands of committed Sandinistas fresh from two years of constant "political education" could have an important impact in Nicaragua.

## Army 'a Political School'

"The Sandinista army is a political school," one ambassador said. "Military service is a building process for the Sandinistas in a social as well as a military sense."

The ambassador estimated that more than 7,000 young people had been discharged from the army in recent months. Commander Carrion said the number exceeded 4,000 for Managua alone.

The Government is making special efforts to insure that all former soldiers are able to find work or to return to their studies. Most will also become squad or platoon leaders in military reserve units.

Not all veterans have made a smooth transition to civilian life, however. There have been reports that in some communities recently discharged men have been arrested for acts of violence.

## The Draft Goes On

The impact of the soldiers' return to civilian life may be heightened by the fact that the first large groups of Nicaraguans who have been in extended study courses abroad are also coming home now. Most attended schools in Cuba, Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union and have been away for five years or longer.

Several recently demobilized soldiers interviewed in Managua said they would be ready to return to active duty if called. But Nicaragua is a country of young people and there is no shortage of 16-year-olds to fill the places these men are leaving.

The draft is continuing, with Sandinista youth groups and trade unions providing most of the young people to replace those now being discharged. Laws permitting medical exemptions and deferments for sole surviving sons appear to be more widely respected now than before. There is no provision for conscientious objection, however.

Service remains obligatory, although those who genuinely wish to avoid it and have some resources still have ways to do so.

The September 14 neighborhood, where Mr. Carrion and other officials congratulated discharged soldiers, has had its share of funerals for local youths killed in battle, residents said. A woman selling fruit drinks said her son had fled to Costa Rica to avoid the army.

But those who joined the military and survived two years of service are beginning to form a cadre of Sandinista activists with special attachment to their cause.

As they marched toward the field where they were to bid farewell to army life, at least temporarily, the youths were preceded by a corps of

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majurettes and 16 drummers playing martial beats.

"Here are the people who are guaranteeing our happiness by defending Nicaraguan sovereignty and fighting American imperialism," proclaimed a man in a truck who spoke over a loud-speaker at the head of the parade. "These are the heroes who are defeating the C.I.A. mercenaries."

Residents stood on sidewalks and many clapped as the young men in fatigues passed. The men smiled, waved and shouted slogans to the crowd and each other. "Let Reagan send whoever he wants," cried one. "They'll have to get past us if they want to take this country."

Under a light drizzle, each soldier was given a pin attesting to his military service and a certificate affirming that he had "carried out his sacred duty to the nation with dignity and patriotism." The national anthem was played and there were speeches and emotional embraces.

Like other mothers who attended the ceremony, María de los Santos Gutiérrez said she had spent much of the last two years praying for her son. She last saw him when he was given a brief home leave six months ago.

"I have Roger back and that makes me happier than anything," Mrs. Gutiérrez said. "I'm sure he will go back to work and do whatever is expected of him."